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The Ecstatic Truth of the Lyric Essay: *About a Mountain* and the Skewed Path towards Ecological Agency

Abstract: This article aims to analyse the narrativization of scientific truth claims and journalistic reports in the realm of non-fiction through an intermedial analysis of *About a Mountain* (2010) by John d'Agata, a text described by its author as a "lyric essay." Loosely centered around the allocation of radioactive deposits inside of Yucca Mountain, not far from Las Vegas, but braided with numerous other stories, *About a Mountain* creatively strays away from the generic constraints of journalism through what this article identifies as the use of 'ecstatic truth' in order to create a 'skewed path' towards ecological agency. The lyric essay's transmediation of factual and scientific truth claims into a more informal and literary medium for a wider public is also identifiable in *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), a companion book co-authored with d'Agata's fact checker, Jim Fingal. *Lifespan*, an alleged record of their seven-years long conversation regarding the authenticity of the depiction of the facts dramatized in what would become *About a Mountain*, sheds light on d'Agata's methods and biases and on the negotiations between the scientific discourse of journalism and the poetic discourse of creative nonfiction. An intermedial methodology, informed by narratology, genre studies, and ecocriticism, is used to identify the generic traits of the lyric essay as media affordances, paying particular attention to its use of truth claims and fictionality. Overall, this article seeks to identify the medium specificity of the lyric essay as a unique genre blending fiction and nonfiction, and hence its unique approach to environmental issues and ecological emergencies.

Keywords: Lyric essay, Eecstatic truth, intermedial Analysis, creative nonfiction, ecological agency, truth claims.

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Introduction

A confrontation with an emergency can bring disillusionment towards works of fiction, but not necessarily towards the literary. When dealing with complicated issues with wide global ramifications such as our current environmental crisis, the essay genre, with its forthrightness and its groundedness in facts, may seem to many as a more appropriate form compared to fictional genres such as cli-fi or the realist novel. Because of its "robust adaptability, imaginative and political, as well as [...] its information-carrying capacity and its aura of the real" (Nixon 25), a militant essayism can be thought to be an optimal rhetorical tool to generate support towards political cause. A shift towards nonfiction can thus characterize the transformation from successful artist to writer-activist: for example, shortly after the publication of the successful *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy saw fit to "redirect her creative energies from fiction toward the polemical, interventionist essay" (Nixon 157) in order to directly address topical issues such as the construction of mega-dams and nuclear tests, as well as wider issues such as neoliberalism and globalization. There is then evidence for a widespread agreement that, for the sake of clarity and persuasion, certain issues should be explored with arguments rather than with narratives—a position symptomatic of a 'reality hunger'. Indeed, nonfiction holds a terrific track record in bringing people into progressive social movements, a prime example being Rachel Carson's seminal *Silent Spring* (1962). Nonfiction is, however, an extremely wide domain, which includes "memoirs, essays, public science writing, polemics, travel literature, graphic memoirs, manifestos, and investigative journalism" (Nixon 25). Each of these subgenres negotiates differently between accuracy and readability, rhetoric and factuality, and each has its own 'expectations of truthfulness', or the audience's impression that what is being read is authentic or verifiable.

Scientific data, theoretical analyses, and all the other details needed to apprehend the scale and seriousness of climate catastrophes are particularly difficult topics to address in a popular manner. In Roy, Nixon identifies the role of a sort of popular translator, the writer-activist who uses her privilege to 'break down' the difficult topics, and to bring through light, through her narrative capital, important witnesses (Nixon 171). Writer-activism is however not the only format through which nonfiction can address ecological issues and may be only one way among many to draw on the affordances of the essay genre. This article seeks to read John D'Agata's concept of "the lyric essay," particularly its application in *About a Mountain* (2010), as such alternative intermediary between a literal and factual nonfiction and creative fictional prose. Too literary for the standards of nonfiction, too bereft of narrative to be seen as fiction, and overall too polemical to be neatly categorized within the strain of meditative "nature writing," *About a Mountain* deals mainly with the controversies surrounding the selection of Yucca Mountain as a storage facility for nuclear waste, and is an especially indicative execution of the lyric essay's ideals. Alongside, John D'Agata's and Jim Fingal's

dialogic *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), which presents itself as a report of the conversation between D'Agata and Jim Fingal, his assigned fact-checker, as well as David Shields' influential *Reality Hunger*, are used as manifestos of this genre's *ars poetica*. A braided essay covering multiple stories centered around the city of Las Vegas, *About a Mountain* deploys its generic repertoire, which the article connects with the traditional essay, for ecological aims, not only using its creative and polemical tone to criticize the United States' conduct with nuclear waste disposal, as a formal exposé would, but also to elevate the conversation to a higher level. Chief among the traits of the lyric essay, this article argues, stands self-reflexivity, which is expressed as the text's consistent awareness of its own epistemological limitations, as well as its unique relationship with truthfulness.

The Lyric Essay and the Traditional Essay

When in 1997 John D'Agata and Deborah Tall coined the term "lyric essay," they were at once conjuring up an ancient and often misunderstood tradition and laying the basis for its renewal. To the eyes of a general readership, the term 'essay' had by then evolved away from its original connotations, those followed by the authors still trailing after Michel de Montaigne's foundational *Essais* (1588), into the much more generic idea of 'nonfiction'. With this history in mind, the introduction of the qualifier 'lyric' can be seen not exactly as a move towards prose-poetry,[1] but as an attempt to convey the idea that the standards usually applied to nonfiction were to be taken more loosely. First among them, the lyric essay seeks to change its relationship to truthfulness, hence its alternative name 'creative nonfiction' (D'Agata 2014, 6), which to this day is still the name of the course led by D'Agata himself at the University of Iowa's renowned Writers' Workshop. In 2010, David Shields, a later adopter and popularizer of the term, stepping into a decade which would see a resurgence of nonfiction writing, would write in his manifesto *Reality Hunger*:

> The lyric essay doesn't expound, is suggestive rather than exhaustive, depends on gaps, may merely mention. It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidewinding poetic logic. It often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically, its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole. (Shields 130).

1 This is a disputed claim. Brenda Miller, in *A Braided Heart: Essays on Writing and Form* writes that "the lyric essay is quite an ancient form; it's nothing new" (42). Others, such as Michelle Dicinoski in "Wild associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the lyric essay," think that "the lyric essay has learned many tricks from poetry" (3). This article interprets the lyric essay as following the traditional essay form, although with a slight revamp.

As these are not traits new to the essay form ("mosaically" among them being a descriptor of the essay famously used by Adorno in "The Essay as Form") but qualities which would have become odd to the general reader who had grown accustomed to seeing in nonfiction an altogether prosaic genre, it is critical to investigate the media qualities of the lyric essay in awareness of the tradition of the essay genre.

Reassessing and reuniting with the original form of the essay has been a project spearheaded by D'Agata himself, who has authored an anthological trilogy called "A New History of the Essay".[2] Yet, controversially, D'Agata delves far deeper in time than usual when searching for the origin of the genre, which is canonically attributed to Michel de Montaigne.[3] In *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009) D'Agata displays a fascination toward the genre's lost creative possibilities, traits which have dwindled with the advent of a classification of disciplines functioning on rigid discursive norms. Returning to ancient texts, especially discounted and 'expired' genres which thrived before the popularization of the novel, is a practice bound to run into friction with our contemporary generic expectations. Such fascination is discernible in W. G. Sebald's prominent use of English physician and essayist Thomas Browne in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), an extremely influential text which has renewed the genre of the novel with its bold hybridization with the essay form. Reading Browne, also championed by *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), projects us into a world where nonfiction texts are written creatively and are "a form that's not propelled by information," as we are used to nonfiction today, "but one compelled instead by individual expression—by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt" (D'Agata 2009, 4). Exemplary to this regard is his joint publication of *Hydriotaphia/The Garden of Cyrus* (1658). The first text, also known as *Urn Burial*, lays down the thoughts of the author in his encounter with sepulchral urns at the time newly uncovered in Norfolk, and matches an extremely erudite analysis of the archaeological site, equipped with dutiful citations and adorned with personal musings on the volatility of life. It is effectively a scientific inquiry pursued with literariness and pervaded throughout with the idiosyncratic spirit of the author. The following *The Garden of Cyrus* strikes one

2 *The Next American Essay* (2003), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), *The Making of the American Essay* (2016).

3 Despite Montaigne owing a lot to Plutarch, and despite Francis Bacon, one of its earliest adopters in English, writing of the essay genre "The word [its name] is late, but the thing is ancient" (Bacon xvii), the birth of the essay—and indeed the very name of the genre—is still uncontroversially associated with Montaigne. According to Alastair Fowler, it is an amalgamation of different genres: "the treatise, the colloquy, the adage, the exemplum or sententia collection, the encyclopedic gathering of authorities, and the Humanistic letter of informal instruction" (Fowler 157). A noted critique of D'Agata's excessive digging, or loose definition of the essay as a genre, is "In Defense of Facts" by William Deresiewicz, published in *the Atlantic* in 2017.

as even more unsuitable for a modern audience, as it is an esoteric study of a mystical reality revolving around the repeating pattern of the quincunx, identifiable throughout nature in many forms, and thus betrays a distinctly pre-Enlightenment fascination towards a discarded monism. By precluding the possibility of these two discourses to interact, that is, a factual and disinterested account of reality on one side, and a literary expression of subjectivity on the other, generic constraints have on the greater part divorced creativity from nonfiction, making the label 'creative nonfiction' seem like an oxymoron. As R. Lane Kauffmann writes in "The skewed path: Essaying as un-methodical method": "To read Montaigne now is to realize that the contemporary essayist travels under a more rigid protocol, within more carefully patrolled boundaries" (223).

To understand the lyric essay's medium specificity an analysis of the lost affordances found within the past iterations of the genre is necessary. First off, *About a Mountain*'s title can be seen as a generic indicator directing us toward this lost past, etc. The titular mountain, Yucca Mountain, is only indirectly mentioned in the title, suggesting, through its indeterminacy, a more figurative reading, steeped perhaps in broader universal contemplations, much like Browne's equally vague *Urn Burial*. Beyond that, "about" can also be read as a conversation with the genre's past: The Latin particle *de*, meaning about/regarding, and used in classic texts, is covertly mentioned by the title to suggest a continuity with a very ancient tradition.[4] Finally, as the text unfolds, it becomes clear that the title seeks to indicate self-reflexivity, or the quality of the essay of problematizing its own writing, addressing its own awareness of objects as an object in itself which must at all times be kept into account. As a young György Lukács wrote: "[t]he essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judgement" (Lukács 18). This also separates it from investigative journalism, which rarely trades its object for an epistemological exploration of what it means to investigate it, thus opting for more concrete tiles. A fundamental trope of the lyric essay could then be identified in what in narratology is referred to as *metalepsis*, a literary device that Gérard Genette, in *Figures*

4 Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of Literature* (1982) is primarily concerned with literary genres, but it is also deeply informed by Renaissance and Early-modern literary studies, which is when the genre of the essay developed, and can thus offer numerous insights on the matter: "Titles beginning with *de* at first implied a tractatus or discursive treatise. But from Montaigne onward, the form was appropriated by the essay. In the vernacular, short titles of this type (*Of Studies*; *Of Resolution*) introduce most of the informal essays of Bacon, Felltham, and others. Thus, the titling convention of the essay inherits that of its generic antecedents" (Fowler 92). The Montaignan 'de' is also present in other traditions. Claire de Obaldia identifies it in Lukacs' own essay on the essay, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay": "Lukacs's title connotes 'aboutness' ('Uber', in the tradition of the Montaignain 'de' ...) [...]" (de Obaldia 100).

III (1972), re-framed as a signpost of metafictionality. Outside a strictly narrative context, metalepsis can be recognised in the fact that "the essayist must continually reflect on the context or circumstance of his own discourse [...]" (Kauffmann 235).

About a Mountain opens with an anatomy of Las Vegas city and its increasingly populated suburbs, performed through a casual cultural study of its urban development and the narratives surrounding it. The Summerlin suburb, where the mother of John D'Agata, our first-person narrator, has rehomed, is explored as a quasi-utopian attempt to build "the most successful master planned community of America" (D'Agata 22). A pastoral, if trivial, essence haunts its atmosphere: D'Agata picks and chooses facts to construct a certain image, such as Summerlin winning the "GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS WORLD'S LARGEST GROUP HUG!" (D'Agata 23). In sharp contrast, the urban area, overloaded with signs and advertisements, is constructed as a city known for its cheap thrills and lush eccentric hotels. Lastly, a third environment becomes evident, the third excluded party of nature, as Michel Serres addressed it in *The Natural Contract* (1990). It is presented as the original land, which was supposed to be solely inhabited by "sagebrush and creosote and hundreds of thousands of yuccas" (D'Agata 2010, 25), a background from which the spaces of the city and the suburbs seek refuge from, or which they, quite invisibly, exploit. Our glance is directed then at the rapidly depleting natural (and artificial) resources, such as lake Mead, the artificial lake formed beneath the Hoover dam whose water is channelled into Las Vegas. To kick off the first investigative quest is a scandal involving Yucca Mountain, first heard of through a TV interview of Governor Harry Reid witnessed by D'Agata and the Summerlin community in a pub: "I have been fighting against [radioactive deposits in] Yucca Mountain because it threatens the health and security of everyone in our state. The science they're doing there is incomplete, faulty, and totally unsafe. [...]" (D'Agata 2010, 32). From then on, the focus shifts to the seditious attempts of a nuclear lobby to persuade the citizens of Nevada to accept the controversial plan to use Yucca Mountain as a storage facility for nuclear waste. The scepticism towards the project is explained through numerous arguments, each uncovering a way in which essential details regarding the safety of the operations had been systematically omitted from conversations.[5]

Yet there is an additional layer of controversies: the public feels lied to. D'Agata frames this debate as a proper campaign of disinformation, wherein a state lobby attempts to produce narratives "by deploying 'scientific truth squads' throughout the House and Senate"

5 Some of the issues of contentions are: excessive costs, unresolved scientific issues, and exposure to corrosive elements, including water (D'Agata 2010, 55); the porosity of the mountain (55); the fact that "the entire mountain was likely to move almost fifty full feet over the next 1,000 years" (60); issues regarding the transportation of the radioactive waste (64); and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of the clean-up in case a spill occurs during said transportation (74).

(D'Agata 2010, 34). There is then not only a focus on the hazards of the situation, but also on the intersection of power and narratives. Through its use of a sceptical voice, *About a Mountain* highlights how perception never does justice to the reality behind it; for example, Yucca Mountain itself is far from striking scenery, and hardly catches the eye, making it an ideal place for unethical procedures: "[it] isn't pretty. And it also isn't large. From far away, the mountain's just a squat bulge in the middle of the desert, essentially just debris from a bigger, stronger mountain that erupted millions of years ago and hurled its broken pieces into piles across the earth" (D'Agata 2010, 86). In sharp contrast, the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, a 1,149-foot-high tower, conquers the landscape with its height alone. The second part of the narrative follows an event which occurred on the highest floors of the Stratosphere Hotel, from where a teen, with whom the diegetic D'Agata believes to have prior spoken to on a suicide hotline, had jumped off. The mystery then becomes the kid's story and motivation, a reconstruction of his identity and the actions of his last day. Yet even here the narrative digresses into trivial details, seemingly unrelated studies of the buildings' architecture, and a history of controversies surrounding the tower. A digressive, topological rather than chronological plot, dominated by a "spatial logic" (Beaujour 30), is constantly barred from moving forward by an endless succession of newer insights, details endlessly calling upon other details. Rather than a sequence of events, what is being built is a portrait of space (the city, the suburbs, the landscape).

D'Agata's writing fully lives up to the spirit of the label "creative nonfiction", as many passages of *About a Mountain* are virtuosic deployments of the most artistic and literary generic traits of the essay. Juxtaposition braids the two main storylines together in unexpected and *lyrical* ways. For example, a digression on Munch's *The Scream* speaks both to the theme of human communication (and future survival thereof) which is central in the quest for the development of a semiotic system which could manage to ward off any future people from entering the contaminated area of Yucca Mountain, as well as the teen's story, with its theme of suicide and depression. Digressions which would usually become a hindrance to the main plot in a standard fiction are here foregrounded, laying out facts and information with great flourish, such as in the long descriptive passages which make use of *exempla* to properly convene the length of 10.000 years (D'Agata 2010, 62), or in a list showing the diversity of the lifespan of various objects (106), an attempt to make intelligible the large scales involved in ecological crises.[6] There are also many lengthy speculative passages, such as an analysis of all the possible ways in which the transportation of nuclear waste could go wrong, and the

6 Successful representations of the scale of ecological issues, particularly its crisis, are widely debated topics within ecocriticism and considered to be a major issue in the communication of a crisis. See for example Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013) or Timothy Clark's article "Derangements of scale" (2012).

efforts required for the eventual clean-up were they to occur (74). The importance of these informative passages is such that, rather than defining them as digressions, they can be seen as the narrative itself, moving through arguments instead of characters: "In essays, ideas are the protagonists" (Shields 132).

Thus *About a Mountain,* whilst hiding beneath a veneer of journalism, actually displays all the core qualities of the traditional essay. It can thus be seen as an attempt to understand whether this ancient form is fit for contemporary analyses, particularly those which regard the environmental crisis and the new media sphere.

Truthfulness in the Lyric Essay

To assess the qualities which define the lyric essay, we can now compare it on one hand with the journalistic and factual non-fiction from which it seeks emancipation, and on the other to creative literary genres, from which it borrows certain medial qualities. As the text is researched and written much like a nonfiction reportage, blending first hand research and use of secondary sources into a coherent final text which functions within a different discourse altogether, *About a Mountain* transmediates 'factual media' into a medium with a supposedly looser relationship with truthfulness. If scientific articles and news reports are expected to hold the maximum level of external truthfulness, that is, they display "those media traits that are perceived to have real connections to the extracommunicational domain" (Ellestrom 2020, 38), expectation of truthfulness may thin out in media that supplement it with narratives, literariness, and rhetoric to reach a more general audience. An intermedial perspective allows us to track such transformation, as it allows us to observe how "facts, narrative, and audience engagement play out differently in different media types" (Schirrmacher and Mousavi 11) in relation to their respective media specificity.

In our case, transmediation occurs both diachronically and intramedially, from textual sources to a textual target. D'Agata himself found this dynamic to be so insightful to warrant a second book, *The Lifespan of a Fact*, which is structured exactly as a dramatization of the contrast between the two discourses: the dialogue between an art-driven D'Agata, author of the short lyric essay about a teen suicide in Las Vegas which would later expand into *About a Mountain*, and his assigned fact-checker Jim Fingal, here voicing the normative boundaries of the editorial standards for nonfiction books. Even if *The Lifespan of a Fact* is an inventive lyric essay in itself (and thus must equally be read with suspicion) it is indicative of D'Agata's self-aware engagement with the generic constraints of textual forms, and hence of the different medial qualities of the two areas. This text, structured with the original article in the center of the page and the dialogue of Fingal and D'Agata's as its marginalia is effectively a meta-fictional, or rather meta-factual, dialogue on the affordances of differently

qualified media. In the book, Fingal's voice is committed to an ideal wherein truth should take precedence over fiction in all instances, and D'Agata's as that of an author whose poetic sentiment is at all times frustratingly inhibited by nonfiction's generic constraints.

Through D'Agata's interventions in the history of the essay, and through *About a Mountain's* sustained interest in self-reflexivity, we have asserted that a medial quality belonging to the lyric essay it displays is an engagement with aporetic discourse. Scepticism has been a trademark of essayistic writing since Montaigne who, greatly influenced by its Pyrrhonian strain, famously declared "What do I know?", shifting attention from facts to our volatile and fallible relationship with them. If the essay is not philosophy, as it has no method, this problematization of commitment toward any belief is undoubtedly one of its trademarks (Russell 2022). The essay genre does not seek to teach by offering theses but rather educates its reader by inviting them to re-evaluate their relationship with their own judgments, which is framed as constantly on the brink of being deluded and overconfident. Hence, contractually, an essay, as its own etymology betrays, would be too tentative and uncertain to be a proper treatise or reportage. It is a form which undermines its own possibility to draw conclusions, as D'Agata himself, in full conformity with the most canonical analyses of the form such as Lukàcs' and Adorno's, writes in his introduction to Thomas Browne in *The Lost Origins of the Essay*: "And yet, a thesis statement, like an aphorism, precludes real essaying. It denies a text the possibility for reflection, digression, discovery, or change" (D'Agata 2009, 185). Doubt is then the propulsive element in essayistic writing, which would see in any form of closure its own extinction. D'Agata plays directly with this idea by parodying the six tenets of journalism as the chapter headers in *About a Mountain*, which are called "Who", "What", "When", "Where", "Why", "How", and then again "Why", "Why", and "Why", as if no possible explanation could ever be satisfying enough.

By contrast, the factual discourse of journalism can be seen as apodictic, as it seeks nothing other than truth and clarity. In this instance, a truth claim must be "informed by its reference to actual events [...]. Journalistic narration is based on a 'factual pact' between journalists and their audience, the assurance that news should make 'statements about the real world'" (Schirrmacher 29). Of course, an aesthetic flourish is permissible, but not to any extent where it would undermine this relationship to the audience:

> To create empathy and engagement, journalistic storytelling also draws on narrative strategies more familiar from fiction. [...] Still, in the factual context of journalism, such strategies have to be used differently. For example, although reconstructed scenes are frequently used in contemporary feature writing, they have to be marked in some way [...], as the border between actual events and narrative construction easily blurs. (Schirrmacher 30).

It is the difference in the degree of engagement with truthfulness that separates the literary aporetic discourse from the qualities of apodictic and forensic discourse, which embraces an 'external truthfulness' (a 'truth' perceived to be outside the space of communication) grounded upon the verifiability of its claims, and is thus an approach which would justifiably require a fact-checker. However, in *About a Mountain*, at the heart of the contention lie not fabrications worthy of a fiction, but only a slightly skewed version of the facts: *The Lifespan of a Fact* sees Fingal reprimanding D'Agata for "punching up" facts and "streamlining" for seemingly gratuitous reasons. Such is the case, for example, of the summer wherein the events take place being described as so hot as to blow up "the World's Tallest Thermometer" (D'Agata and Fingal 18), a factoid which is flagged as false by Fingal: not only is the thermometer not located in California, but it cannot be verified whether it had happened on that very summer, or if it had been broken by the wind rather than the heat. At first glance, *About a Mountain* distorts reality for the sake of literary flourish and "rhythm", bypassing the strict editorial standards of nonfiction to embellish its prose. But it becomes clear that at stake is not a much too liberal use of artistic licence, but that inaccuracy itself is used by the text as one of its own defining features.

Yet, as much as the lyric essay suffers from its conflation with journalism, it also seeks to emancipate itself from certain constraints which are present in fiction. Most explicitly, the lyric essay does not commit to a fictional pact either, and does not address a fictional or even speculative world wherein the events take place; it therefore still aims to comment on the real world, working thus in the realm of external truthfulness. As *The Lifespan of a Fact* shows, *About a Mountain* delves often into slightly altered fictions, but rarely does it signal to the reader an "expectation of fictionality":

> Fiction is a use of signs meant by the producer to invite the user to imagine, without believing them, states of affairs obtaining in a world that differ in some respect from the actual world. These uses of signs are typically framed by external devices so that users know they are dealing with fiction, not with failed factual representation (i.e., errors and lies), but within the frame, the irreality of these represented states of affairs is not overtly marked, though it may be suggested by so-called "signposts of fictionality." (Ryan 78)

By labeling itself as nonfiction, telling its audience that the matter at hand is the real world, while neither complying with a factual contract nor making use of signpost to address its own fictiveness, the lyric essay is not exactly *fictional* but rather *fictitious* (Cohn 2000, 3), pertaining to lies and inaccuracy.

The Ecstatic Truth of the Lyric Essay

The blatant contradiction between a covert use of fictionality and claims to external truthfulness is not, however, a faulty dynamic of these texts. If an earlier iteration of this dynamic can be identified, it would be Werner Herzog's idea of 'ecstatic truth'. Herzog justifies the use of deception (purposeful inaccuracies, false quotations) in his film-essays with the idea that such forgeries are true to the reality of the issues at hand and thus direct the audience toward the correct insights (Herzog 1). This is the perspective that John in *The Lifespan of a Fact* seems to hint at, and arguably also a trait of the traditional essay which has been re-contextualized by the lyric essay as an attempt to bring a literary element to the literal-mindedness of nonfiction. It is, also, an essentially heretical trait which breaks with most generic and medial conventions.

External truthfulness is a particularly sensitive subject in nonfiction (from reports to historical novels) as there is no clear-cut way to ascertain the veracity of a truth claim outside of the introduction of a new frame of reference which lies outside the text. In *The Distinction of Fiction* (2000), Dorrit Cohn engages with two claims about the subtlety of the difference between fiction and truth: Hayden White's idea that "There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories [...]" (White 121–2) and philosopher John Searle's claim that "There is no textual property, syntactic or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction" (Searle 325). Unless signposted in the text, or inferable from specific paratexts (as the label fiction/nonfiction), there is no way to know whether a truth claim in a text is verifiable or not without doing one's own research on it (that is, stepping outside of the text). Cohn, to distinguish historical narrative from fiction, proposed the introduction of the element of 'reference' on top of the already interrelated 'story' and 'discourse' (Cohn 112). The existence of this reference is at the basis of a contract with the audience: "If we assume—rightly or wrongly—that a discourse is fictive, we read it as inviting us to assume (among other things) that it is not making referential claims, and that its relevance is indirect rather than direct" (Nielsen et al. 68). According to Cohn (and also to editorial labels) the presence of a plane of reference is predominantly binary: it either is there, and the text is factual, or it is not, and the text is fiction, its signs to be assumed as belonging to an alternate fictional world.

But the omission of a fictional plane of reference without the engagement with the editorial requirements that a real plane of reference calls for is exactly the space that the lyric essay seeks to inhabit. In the words of David Shields:

> The lyric essayist seems to enjoy all the liberties of the fiction writer, with none of a fiction writer's burden of unreality, the nasty fact that none of this ever really happened—which a fiction writer daily wakes to. One can never say of the lyric essayist's work that "it's just fiction," a vacuous but prevalent dismissal akin to

> criticizing someone with his own name. "Lyric essay" is a rather ingenious label, since the essayist supposedly starts out with something real, whereas the fiction writer labors under a burden to prove, or create, that reality, and can expect mistrust and doubt from a reader at the outset. In fiction, lyricism can look like evasion, special pleading, pretension. In the essay, it's apparently artistic, a lovely sideshow to The Real that, if you let it, will enhance what you think you know. The implied secret is that one of the smartest ways to write fiction today is to say that you're not, and then to do whatever you very well please. Fiction writers, take note. Some of the best fiction is now being written as nonfiction. (Shields 26)

However, neither D'Agata or Shields see this as an inherent contradiction of their texts, while it remains a striking dissonant note to whomever still abides by the rules of nonfiction and the factual path, like Fingal in the guise of the fact-checker. To properly address the lyric essay, one must then move towards an understanding of fictionality unburdened by binarism: "'Fiction'/'nonfiction' is an utterly useless distinction" (Shields 63). Such an approach has been researched by Richard Walsh in *Rhetoric of Fictionality*:

> Fictive rhetoric exploits representation's power of assimilation more than its modelling of an object. What matters (as far as a fiction's fictive rhetoric is concerned) is the respect in which representations are not their objects but uses of a medium, because this is the respect in which they serve human needs. The fiction/nonfiction distinction is not fundamentally ontological, but pragmatic; not a distinction between referential worlds, but between communicative purposes. (Walsh 128).

Clearly, the lyric essay's disavowal of the fiction label is rooted in the layer of separation from the real world that it presupposes, which would inevitably weaken the rhetorical efficiency of its claims. Nonfiction, appealingly, holds the pleasure to be taken much more seriously: "Facts have gravitas"; "The illusion of facts will suffice" (Shields 2010, 86). This shift from an ontological approach, interested in the degrees of verifiability in the relation between narrated object and its referent, to a rhetorical one, wherein it is the persuasive power of narrative to take over, can be traced back to the essay genre's use of self-reflexivity. It thus owes much to the tradition of essay writing but assumes new characteristics (hence the novelty of the 'lyric' variation of the genre) exactly because it develops in a space where it is not normalized anymore.

However, it would also be reductive to claim that the lyric essay's instrumentalization of inaccuracy finds its only end in this abuse of labels. On the contrary, the lyric essayist maintains that the text, while indeed fleeing from nonfiction's factual constraints, still offers significant claims to truth in at least two ways, through 'indirect relevance' and through scepticism. Regarding the first point, within relevance theory, it can be argued that some

texts provide directly informative claims, while others indirect ones. The idea that a truth can arise within fiction, or even that fiction can be more truthful than literal, nonfiction accounts of events is an old one; "Poetry is More Philosophical than History", Aristotle claimed in *Poetics*. In a chapter of *Truth Claims Across Media*, Tamás Csönge argues that:

> The most common and straightforward form of the concept of "indirect relevance" is the "point" or "(moral) lesson" of a story [...]. It is even more appropriate to say that the fictional mode's relevance to the recipient's physical, social, psychological, or moral reality lies in the comprehension and interpretation of the represented narrative, rather than in the reporting of particular real facts and events. Consequently, these truth claims are inseparable from subjective commitments to certain worldviews, ethical standards, and value judgments. (Csönge 155)

The heresy of the ecstatic truth lies in the fact that it does not use fiction to make indirectly informative claims, nor nonfiction to make directly informative ones, but aims to make indirectly informative claims through nonfiction. In other words, it interprets the real world as a text and prioritizes its interpretation of it over actual facts. Thus D'Agata justifies his abandonment of the factual contract by stating: "I am seeking a truth here, but not necessarily accuracy" (D'Agata and Fingal 107).[7] Under this perspective, any exceedingly literal report of factuality would blind the reader to the real picture, who misses the forest for the trees: "[John] My job is not to re-create a world that already exists, holding up a mirror to the reader's experience in hopes that it rings true. If a mirror were a sufficient means of handling human experience, I doubt that our species would have invented literature" (D'Agata and Fingal 22). Again, if one were to take truthfulness ontologically, this would seem a clear breach of the constraints which separate a scientific discourse from a poetic one.

7 Similarly, in the paper which defines the concept of ecstatic truth, Herzog argues: "We must ask of reality: how important is it, really? And: how important, really, is the Factual? Of course, we can't disregard the factual; it has normative power. But it can never give us the kind of illumination, the ecstatic flash, from which Truth emerges. If only the factual, upon which the so-called *cinéma vérité* fixates, were of significance, then one could argue that the *vérité*—the truth—at its most concentrated must reside in the telephone book - in its hundreds of thousands of entries that are all factually correct and, so, correspond to reality" (Herzog, 7). This perspective is also shared by Shields: "You adulterate the truth as you write. There isn't any pretense that you try to arrive at the literal truth. And the only consolation when you confess to this flaw is that you are seeking to arrive at poetic truth, which can be reached only through fabrication, imagination, stylization. What I'm striving for is authenticity; none of it is real" (Shields 66). Both perspectives are succinctly summed up by D'Agata: "Sometimes we misplace knowledge in pursuit of information. Sometimes our wisdom, too, in pursuit of what's called knowledge" (D'Agata 2010, 189).

But with ecstatic truth, as the reader who is interested in a novel only for the moral of the story rather than for the plot, it would then be possible to cut the middleman out and read a text which deals directly with those claims without any other mediation; an essay whose "theater is the world" (Shields 107), and not a fictional plane of reference.

Ecological Agency and the Lyric Essay

When an essay directs its reader to the construction of its own discourse rather than towards its subject (asking its audience, rather counter-intuitively, to look at the finger and not at the moon) it is directly involving the reader in the production of the meaning of the text, making them an active participant. The text does not see itself as an infallible report of facts, as the didactic nature of the nonfiction label could imply, but just as a voice among many, to be engaged with a scepticism which requires active participation, a "dialogue between writer and reader which replaces scientific monologism [and] implies that the reader is 'no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'" (de Obaldia 54). The self-reflexivity of the lyric essay, which invites an active readership, is then the key factor which redeems the inaccuracy of its statements.[8] This is a quality which does not resolve but rather transcends the contradictions stemming from its problematic relationship with external truthfulness, and which is performed not by offering facts to the reader, but by 'teaching' them to doubt and engage with facts critically. An ecstatic truth would then be valuable not for what it says, which is inaccurate, but for what it does, that is, by affecting the disposition of the reader towards a more critical engagement with statements and truth claims. The lie is also somewhat justified to be covert: as the term 'signpost' from 'signposts of fictionality' implies, fiction must declare itself as such, while the lyric essay never does so. In framing theory, this is an issue of saliency (Wolf 19). Yet the covertness of the lyric essay's use of fictionality is central: it is by introducing an element of unreliability, remarkably similar to the unreliable narrator of fiction, which makes the reader question the conflict of interest between story and discourse, that the disposition of the reader changes from passive to active.

8 Far from being merely an excuse for a belletrist style in an otherwise colorless genre, ecstatic truth in the lyric has multiple uses. Outside of the self-reflexivity that it brings to the text, its use can be justified in two other ways. First, ecstatic truth imbues nonfiction with literariness, elevating the text to the possibilities of fiction: at every turn, *About a Mountain* shows how its 'straight-to-the-point' and methodical alternate version would fail to deliver its messages with the same emphasis, or to communicate them at all. Secondly, it seeks to broaden a portrait of its subject by not redacting the impressions and fantasies which surround it in the name of accuracy, but rather by giving them a voice; hence its use of unverifiable rumors.

Generally, factual texts can have elements of fiction within, in what Tamás Csönge calls a 'complex discourse'. An example is, unsurprisingly, from a film generally identified as a film essay:

> A classic example is a sequence about Pablo Picasso's and Oja Kodar's relationship from Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974). While the film presents the account of the life of the art forger Elmyr de Hory, Welles also demonstrates how forgeries work by creating one. He includes a seemingly authentic storyline about Picasso's romantic affair with the actress, but at the end of the film, he debunks the sequence as an invention of his. (Csönge 156)

This example playfully directs the audience towards a rhetorical understanding of fictionality, one characterized by "contextual assumptions" (Walsh 30). Were the sequence more openly signposted as fiction, and thus hinting at a binary 'ontological' understanding of fictionality which is much less blurred, it would lose its purpose and effectiveness. D'Agata's use of exaggeration is a similar attempt to throw a curveball at the reader, making them question the factuality of the text:

> Jim: I mean, what exactly gives you the authority to introduce half-baked legend as fact and sidestep questions of facticity?
> John: It's called art, dickhead.
> Jim: That's your excuse for everything.
> John: It's not an "excuse," Jim, it's how I approach the genre. In that paragraph, I'm introducing a 1,600-year-old history from India about a guy who supposedly developed a technique for battling his enemies by sticking needles into his slaves and noting the degrees of pain he produced. It's ridiculous on its surface. Don't you think that the average reader is going to recognize that and take this all with a grain of salt? (D'Agata and Fingal 92).

Here D'Agata trusts that the reader will be able to recognise that what is being said is absurd and must be taken sceptically. This in turn provokes a change in the reader's disposition: "The assumption of fictionality, like the assumption of irony, changes our interpretive activity and its outcomes" (Nielsen et al. 68). The reader, feeling betrayed, is scandalized: "[John:] Art is invested with special privileges in our culture because we believe it serves a special role. It's there to challenge us. Rules of any kind do not apply to art, they don't belong in art—even when art causes 'shit storms.' In fact, I'd say one of art's jobs is to incite shit storms" (D'Agata and Fingal 109). The sense of betrayal and mistrust provokes a confrontational reading, an awareness of a fictive discourse seeping through the text unidentified. It is this model of reader engagement that the lyric essay seeks to promote; it may not adhere to the factual contract, but it is still a form of "sacred social service" (D'Agata 2014, 7–8), and thus an earnest ethical commitment.

The concept of ecological agency, "a way to define and discuss how environmental and ecological communication—ecomedia—impact its receivers and how such ecomedia afford human agency in many different form" (Bruhn and Salmose 2023, 40), can be applied to understand whether a reader would find the lyric essay's approach to ecology insightful. Despite not being as polemical and indignant as the essays of writer-activists, an ecological approach is promoted by *About a Mountain* both through straightforward qualities of the essay genre, such as its digressiveness, and through its more particular use of ecstatic truth, an affordance unique to the lyric essay. A literary and artistic essay is perhaps the closest a literary work can get to a scientific monologism while still retaining its fundamental artistic qualities. It can be, for example, a well-referenced, informative, and didactic anatomy of a subject without being a scientific report and all the while being more informative than fiction, as it directly addresses the real world. Aligned with these ideals, *About a Mountain* seeks to entertain while informing, offering insights in ways which would be unfit for either scientific or fictional discourse. Through its free-flowing narration it links particulars to universals, going as far as exploring the concept of entropy (D'Agata 2010, 129), a history of apocalyptic scenarios (150), and even making more sophisticated claims. As an example of the latter, the idea of science (as used in politics and public conversations) is problematized and revealed as not as infallible as it is thought to be (D'Agata 2010, 111). Perhaps the most well executed passage is however the one featuring the "Yucca Mountain Warning Sign Design Contest," a rather negligible high-school project where kids are invited to design signs which could ward off future people from the contaminated area, which turns into a meditation on the possibility of language (and of our current human subjectivity) to persist through time (D'Agata 2010, 97). This width of topics and expressions is arguably a product of the topological, rather than chronological, structure of the traditional essay form, a "spatial logic, as opposed to the chronology of the texts with a narrative dominant" (Beaujour 30). As a statement from John Berger goes, championed also by postmodernist geographer Edward Soja and ecocritic Rob Nixon, "Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection" (Berger 40). This horizontal movement can bring forward unexpected insights, as in an investigation into the character of governor Harry Reid brings forward a history of territorial dispossession of the natives (D'Agata 2010, 46).

Yet *About a Mountain* does not merely use its geographical anatomy to highlight and denounce injustices, an affordance well-recognised by Nixon in the lyric essay, which to him is driven by "a lyricism toward living forms with blasts of sarcasm, parody, hyperbole, vehemence, and blunt anger" (Nixon 170). Rather, it uses ecstatic truth to promote a different kind of agency: instead of arming the reader with information regarding the state of affairs and directing them at the urgency of the crises with an indignant tone, it inoculates them from susceptibility to misinformation. It is, in a way, a use of the negative approach of scepticism as a preventive approach, an immunization of the audience from misinformation.

This is performed not as a scientific analysis of cognitive biases, nor as a philosophical analysis of doxa, but as an artistic use of forgery, or as a literary representation of 'misrecognition'. Thus, a lyric essay concerned with environmental crises would not use its "polemical possibilities" (Nixon 171) to address an emergency directly, as perhaps a journalistic exposé is wont to do, turning the public eye towards an inadmissible scandal. Rather, its path would be more indirect, and its use of methods more subtle, as the title of the article "The skewed path: Essaying as un-methodical method," by R. Lane Kauffmann (1989) suggests.

It is here that a major contradiction in the ecological affordances of the text is present: should a text undermine its own ability to make arguments through scepticism, when commitment towards beliefs is an essential element of activism? Despite being concerned with environmental injustices, *About a Mountain* frames its own search for meanings, reasons, and explanations as pathological. It is this last point which links the two seemingly distant stories of the crisis of Yucca mountain and the teen's death: in an obsessive search for the reasons and circumstances of the teen's suicide, the diegetic D'Agata is found bumping again and again into the number nine, to the point that newer and more accurate information is refuted if it does not fit the mystical explanation. This is a dynamic which is, of course, ultimately conceded as inaccurate. Nonetheless, it is used to expose a human tendency to mischaracterize reality in the name of a volatile interpretation which has the power to emotionally resonate. By showing his own susceptibility to misreadings, D'Agata warns the reader of the fallibility of human communication as a whole, and calls for an attentive readership of any text; a reading approach which recalls the engagement of canonical essayists such as Thomas Browne who, in his *The Garden of Cyrus*, similarly challenges the reader through his display of obsession toward the repeating pattern of the quincunx throughout nature.

About a Mountain can be seen in this perspective as D'Agata's attempt to apply the form of the lyric essay to a relevant issue such as ecological emergency. Rather than directing the essay's formal possibilities toward straightforward informative nonfiction, effectively turning the issue of Yucca mountain into yet another case of what could be labelled as "militant particularism" (Nixon 170), its concerns limited to the scale of the crisis, D'Agata employs the qualities of the traditional essay form to 'expand' the scope of the discussion and to radically change the way in which reading is approached.

Conclusion

In line with Adorno's concluding thought from his famous article on the essay, that "the essay's innermost formal law is heresy" (Adorno 81), the lyric essay breaks conventions in both fiction and nonfiction as codified genres. Its use of fictionality is not signposted, nor does it affiliate itself with any fictional genre (and its corresponding fictional world theory); rather, "fictive discourse" is addressed as a reality inseparable from the real world.

Importantly, the lyric essay brings attention to the difference between fiction as an editorial genre and fictionality as a broader domain.[9] The ecstatic truths of *About a Mountain* can thus be seen as a rhetorical approach similar to that of other ambiguously truthful genres in nonfiction, such as documentaries with an unreliable narrator, or with the celebrated strain of artistic and deceitful life-writing which has been more recently identified as 'auto-fiction'.[10]

With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and its surrounding discourse regarding 'post-truth', the issue of truthfulness and malicious manipulations of facts haunt texts like these even more deeply. The adaptation of *The Lifespan of a Fact* into a 2018 Broadway play, starring Daniel Radcliffe, is a sign that this discussion has survived into said new era, so much so that a review published in *Vulture* argued: "Yes, the real D'Agata and Fingal's book came out in the lost days of hope known as 2012, but the world that Radcliffe is talking about is this one" (Holdren 2018). Writing in retrospection to the mixed reception of *The Lifespan of a Fact*, D'Agata says "I was expecting some kick-back from journalists, who huddle with us beneath that big umbrella term of 'nonfiction,' but who clearly are engaged in a sacred social service whose stakes are considerably higher, more timely, and thus more consequential—socially speaking" (D'Agata 2014, 7-8). Here the intention is manifest: one can redeem the breaking of the factual contract for trivial, aesthetic, and argumentative reasons, as long as the author is informally still committed to a "sacred social service." This is indeed a claim to authenticity, albeit towards a social commitment rather than to verifiable external truthfulness. Clearly, if there are no neat boundaries in how an author can lie about the facts, it could be argued that the potential for a slippery slope towards complete manipulation has been opened. However, the essayistic refusal to commit to any given thesis can act as a safeguard from this hypothetical pitfall.

Pure essayistic writing, the "lost form" mourned by D'Agata, instrumentalizes this own frailty it holds and addresses it as an affordance. If a revival of a "true" essayism is still uncertain, even in a time when nonfiction has found remarkable success, D'Agata proves that certain texts can still hold a unique function in today's state of affairs, which is that of providing a model of the navigation of uncertainty after an extensive loss of faith in the value

9 As the tenth thesis of "Ten Theses about Fictionality" argues: "The importance of fictionality has been obscured by our traditional focus on fiction as a genre or set of genres" (Nielsen et al. 2015, 70).

10 Both the analysis of documentary and of life-writing through the lens of the unreliable narrator, a concept first coined in the influential *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) by Wayne C. Booth, has been applied, in documentaries, by Fiona Otway in the article "The unreliable narrator in documentary" (2015), and for life-writing by Timothy Adams in his book *Telling lies in modern American autobiography* (1990).

of the verifiability of truth claims. If ultimately it could be argued that D'Agata's and Shields' interest in the lyric essay may seem more conceptually interesting than effective in navigating emergencies, texts like *About a Mountain* provide valuable insights to the ways in which nonfiction can still be used creatively in unexpected ways.

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